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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the activities and results of a year-long intergenerational electronic communication project. The fundamental purpose of the project was for two distinct generational groups in the same geographical community--second grade students and senior citizens--to get involved in a dialogue featuring discussion topics generated by the second grade teacher. These topics were planned to integrate with regular scheduled student activities in the classroom. It was also a goal of the project that face-to-face meetings between the two groups would occur. The researchers used Erikson's psychosocial theory of development as a theoretical framework for understanding the interactions between the two groups, as well as for generally assessing the differences and potential for connecting and communicating ideas. One of the major goals for success was to see if the communication would continue throughout the school year; it succeeded because of initial negotiations that took place with both seniors and teachers. Secondly, the face-to-face meetings were successful and more effective because of the prior connections made through e-mail. Thirdly, the project generated goodwill toward the school in a community that traditionally has not been supportive, interested, or aware of school issues. (AEF)

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Implementing intergenerational electronic communications into the curriculum: Results of a year-long case study featuring second graders and senior citizens.

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Project Introduction

In early 1995, the researchers began working with a second grade teacher and a group of senior citizens on a long-term e-mail-based project designed to involve the seniors in the education of a second-grade class. After an extensive planning period, the project actually started in August, 1996, and the initial phase concluded in May, 1997. The purpose of this paper is to provide a description of the activities and results of this year-long intergenerational electronic communication project.

Project Goals

The fundamental purpose of the project was for two distinct generational groups in the same geographical community to get involved in a year-long dialogue featuring discussion topics generated by the second grade teacher. These topics were planned to integrate with regular scheduled student activities in the classroom. A key expectation was that as the seniors brought outside experiences and recollections into the second grade classroom, the students would come to see the senior community as part of their own, but also that the seniors would come to understand and support the school community. Consequently, it was also a goal of the project that face to face meetings between the two groups would also occur. These face to face opportunities were identified as not only the natural outcome of the process, but a necessary part of creating an intergenerational community building experience. One of the key insights of this project was that the Internet could serve to lower barriers between communities that were geographically close, but socially unconnected, i.e. generationally distant, and enable such meetings to happen.

The researchers used Erikson's psychosocial theory of development as a theoretical framework for understanding the interactions between the two groups, and found it to be an extremely productive for that purpose. We also framed our investigation in terms of our goal of creating an "intergenerational community." In this context, "intergenerational" refers to an attempt to bond members of two different generations for the purpose of achieving a goal which reflects the commonality of both. "Community" refers to a physical or virtual collection of members whose existence is predicated on common interests, beliefs, or space. The goals implied in the two terms provided the researchers with a basis for observing and describing how the project, through the use of the Internet, was beneficial in providing a common experience for both groups. In addition, Erikson's psychosocial theory on development was used in generally assessing the distinctive differences and potential for connecting and communicating ideas.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory of Development

Erikson's psychosocial theory of development was developed as a way of adding on to Freud's theory of psychosexual development (Miller, 1993). Unlike Freud's theory focusing on the stages of child development, Erikson attempted to develop a theory which addressed a life-long developmental process featuring key points of psychological crises that needed to be resolved as one matures through the eight stages. The crises points were labeled as follows and roughly correspond to stages of maturity (Erikson, 1980).

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Psychological Crises	Developmental Stage
Stage 1- Trust vs. Mistrust	Infancy
Stage 2- Autonomy vs. Shame	18 months to 3 years
Stage 3- Initiative vs. Guilt	3 years to 6 years
Stage 4- Industry vs. Inferiority*	6 years to 12 years
Stage 5- Identity and Repudiation vs. Identity Diffusion	Adolescence
Stage 6- Intimacy and Solidarity vs. Isolation	Young Adulthood
Stage 7- Generativity vs. Self-absorption	Adulthood
Stage 8- Integrity vs. Despair*	Aging

* Stages representative of the two groups involved in the project.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory Characteristics Of The Two Project Groups

Although, Erikson's stages included eight monumental instances of development, this study involved groups who are primarily entering the fourth (2nd graders) and eighth (seniors) stages of Erikson's model. In stage four, industry vs. inferiority, children enter the larger world of knowledge and work. Learning about others, things, and skills help make up their identity. Likewise, it is very important that guidance be given to help alleviate frustration and failure. Seniors have entered stage eight which is characteristic of the conflict between integrity and despair. They have begun the process of accepting the limitations of life, and have viewed their success in terms of sharing a larger history that includes previous generations. A sense of commitment to the future takes the shape of increased interest in doing positive things not for one's own gratification, but for the sense of leaving a legacy. This legacy includes a sense of history that is uniquely needed in the development of the children operating in the fourth stage. Conversely, the seniors need the reinforcement from children to help alleviate the feelings of despair which are often characterized as regret for what one has not done in one's life and disgust with one's self and fear of one's death.

Erikson identifies community as a central theme existing in both the 4th and 8th stages concerning the radius of significant relations (Miller, 1993). In the industry vs. inferiority stage children extend their concept of belonging outside of the basic family to include membership in a community. This includes the psychosocial modality of making things with others together and identifying with those accomplishments. In the 8th stage, community has been extended to include a more general membership to mankind. This includes a special kinship with other 8th stage members who can share a sense of survival as well as a sense of wisdom-gathering that must be handed down to future generations. The need for this intergenerational connection creates both a need to connect as well as increased feelings of alienation. This wisdom is perceived by the 8th stage members to be important yet unappreciated by members of the other stages of psychosocial development.

Second Grade Activities Concerning Community Concepts

Second graders in school are typically in the process of learning about community and identifying community members. This includes examples of communicating with other second graders internationally to experience what other communities are like throughout the world. In addition, the kids are learning about what makes up a member in their own communities. An interesting method for teaching children community involves lessons that attempt to characterize members by describing what they do, such as little league coach, preacher, fireman. One of the apparent negative results in this teaching method is children learning that active careers as being the most important factor in determining members of the community. Seniors have a tendency to be ignored due to the fact that they are no longer active members providing a visible function in the community. Attempts at introducing concepts of family with community can be adopted to foster a connection with grandparents and seniors in the community.

Components of the Local Internet Community

The Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) has been constructed to provide the citizens of Blacksburg with tools to foster community involvement. It essentially provides internet access to a large number of local community members. One of the most innovative concepts of the Blacksburg Electronic Village is the ability to provide a vehicle in which local community members can interact, express concerns, provide information and services for each other with the end result being an electronic local social interaction. Rogers (1983) identified this very concept as being an innovation that could bolster and redefine community membership in the information age. One of the most active user groups in the BEV community is the senior citizen user group. The purpose statement of the senior citizens group in BEV is as follows:

> BEV-Seniors have the primary goal of enhancing computer communications among senior citizens by improving their ability to use computers and BEV software. On the BEV-Seniors Listserv and on the BEV "Seniors Information Page" we also:
>
> • Discuss local topics in which we have shared interests from the perspective of being responsible, concerned senior citizens.
>
> • Inform and entertain within the limits of shared experiences, interests of our age group, with good taste and a civil, respectful attitude for all people.

(Blacksburg Electronic Village Seniors Purpose Statement, 1997).

It is clear that the group's emphasis on their civic role fits with the features of Erikson's eighth stage. The group's activities include an active e-mail list, a compilation of web resources (local and national covering such areas as finance, health care, and computing), and homepages for a significant number of the group. They also meet monthly in the community center.

Adapting The Internet For An Intergenerational Educational Experience

Conventionally, the Internet is thought of as a tool for bridging geographical distance. Many Internet projects, especially in the K-12 arena, reflect that facility, connecting kids with communities and classes all over the world, and generally addressing global issues (Burgstahler, 1996; Ellsworth, 1997, Wolcott, 1996). This has partly been a product of those institutions connected to the Internet, many of which have been government and education-related. However, as the number of private citizens and other institutions connecting via the Internet increases, new possibilities have emerged. One such possibility is to bridge generational or sociological distance, by bringing together those groups who are marginalized in the conventional structures of community life. This has become possible in a community like Blacksburg, because it is an experimental site for the Electronic Village concept. In BEV all citizens have been encouraged and supported in connecting to the Internet, and consequently some groups have become very active. One of these groups is the senior citizens, particularly as the community is also promoting itself as a retirement community (Blacksburg Electronic Village Vision Statement, 1994).

Project Description

The project involved many players, however, one of the goals in implementing the project was trying to make the communication technology as transparent as possible. This is especially important when introducing technologies to younger students. In addition, teachers are less likely to take time away from regular class activities when technology usage becomes too burdensome. The project was purposefully designed with the idea that the most basic of computer communication technology be used. Thus the primary source of communication was the use of the classroom e-mail system (second graders) and the seniors project listserv (senior citizens). A listserv was set up for the interactions of this group. Students sent messages to this listserv and seniors on the listserv responded as they saw fit.

Time Profile

The project was designed to be carried out throughout the school year. This included both the Fall and Spring Semesters of 1996 and 1997. After assessing if there was enough meaningful exchange, the project would be continued for the following year depending on willing participants.

Interaction Protocol

The second graders worked in small groups composing questions and comments. The seniors involved responded individually either to a particular group of students, to the list and to any message they wished. All messages between student groups and seniors were included on the Youth-Senior Listserv. Topics were selected by the teacher and centered around particular themes covered during the school year.

Supervision Of Project

Although the listserv was set up by BEV, it was maintained and monitored by the researchers. All particular messages to the students were first read by the teacher. Any needless messages that did not appear appropriate for the students could be deleted by the teacher. The teacher also supervised the messages composed by the students.

Senior Participation Of The Project

The details of how the project was to be conducted and how the seniors were to participate were established after lengthy negotiations with the seniors and the teacher involved. The seniors group is generally in high demand for internet-related projects and they generally reject most requests. Typically, this is because they do not fit with the seniors purpose and local orientation. The seniors were also concerned about their potential workload, since they typically lead busy lives. They were also concerned that the teacher take some responsibility to filter the students' messages. Having addressed these concerns, we found that the teacher was concerned that the seniors might find the experience too boring. Generally speaking none of these concerns emerged as a problem. Once both groups approved, the seniors were recruited from the existing BEV Seniors group. Presentations about the project were made via e-mail and at the group's monthly meeting, and about twenty seniors signed up for the project

Role Of The Teacher In The Project

The project was designed to enable the teacher to build in the electronic intergenerational communication into the existing curriculum. There were key themes that were developed and served as starting points for communication activity between the second graders and the seniors. This served to further represent the critical relationship between the seniors historical reflections and the existing topics covered in the classroom. It was considered important by the researchers that the project communications not exist outside of the context of the learning by the students. A secondary role of the teacher was to acquaint and assist the students with necessary skills for composing and sending e-mail messages. This included proof reading student composed messages to insure that they would be understood and not be redundant. The teacher's role included being a gate keeper for the incoming messages to insure that they were developmentally appropriate and clearly stated for the second graders to understand.

Project Assessment

In assessing the benefits of the project, the second grade teacher and senior citizens were interviewed to assess the perceived worth of the experience. Project assessment areas that were intended to be explored included:

- appropriateness for learning/teaching class concepts
- perceived worth of learning about other group
- perceived worth in building relationships with other group
- perceived building of mutual respect
- perceived similarities with other group
- perceived potential for long term and on-going relationships
- project implementation effectiveness and weaknesses

The second part of the project assessment featured the communication archives. The electronic communication between the senior citizens and second graders have been collected and a content analysis will be

conducted focusing on areas and levels of engagement between the two groups as well as to provide a reference for some of the issues that emerge from the participant interviews.
The final component of the project assessment featured observations of the two groups in face to face communication in the form of two social "get-togethers" (Valentine's Day party, and an end-of-the-year park outing). The observations centered on how the two groups demonstrated ease in communicating with one another, respect for one another, and social cohesiveness.

Communication Content Analysis

The communication between the two members were categorized in the themes selected by the teacher. For the year, these themes reflected common experiences that both the second graders and seniors could easily relate to and reflect upon. The communication themes were as follows:

- Reflections on celebrating Halloween
- Traveling for Holidays
- Reflections on celebrating Thanksgiving
- Christmas Traditions
- Games that people play and watch
- Planning of a Valentines Day party
- Hobbies, interests, and collectibles
- Favorite books to read
- Favorite places to visit
- Ways of celebrating Earth-Day
- Summer Plans

It became apparent through reading the messages that the second graders' role of asking questions and the seniors' role in supplying recollections became the predominant structure of the communication. It was consistent throughout the themes that the students were interested in personal stories such as, "what was it like to go to school back then?" It became clear through reading student composed that the students were identifying with the seniors on a more than superficial nature as the project progressed. In one of the messages, the class reported to the seniors how wonderful it was to talk with them because most of their real grandparents lived far away. This included a survey the students conducted concerning how many of their grandparents lived far away. The results showed that 8 of the 14 students had grandparents who lived outside of the Western Virginia area, 10 of the 14 had students living outside of the city of Blacksburg. The opportunity for the students to interact with grandparents were severely limited, thus, the role of the seniors became more of a surrogate electronic "grandparent". The messages reflected both the students and the seniors expressing themselves in what could be interpreted as a grandparent/grandchild relationship.

Synopsis Of Senior Responses To The Project

Initially some of the seniors' responses to the teacher's postings were quite lengthy (up to five long paragraphs). The teacher soon found that she had trouble keeping up with reading the responses to the students, and asked the seniors to send responses which were about two paragraphs in length. This proved to be less intimidating to the slower typists among the seniors and led to more responses from them. The seniors responded consistently whatever the topic themes turned out to be. Generally, if they had no experience which directly related to a theme, they took the opportunity to tell stories about similar events or activities, either from their youth or from more recent events related to their own family's experience. In either case, their narrative was typically focused on particular experiences in which there was an explicit moral lesson to be drawn, essentially a form of fable. Again, this fits with Erikson's eighth stage, where seniors feel the need to communicate information to their wider community for the purpose of passing on their wisdom. It is also possible that this way of communicating might have been a product of the fact that the seniors knew that their peers would be reading their responses. Interestingly some seniors chose to respond directly to the teacher and did not post their responses on the listserv. This may have been partly a product of the technology, but it is clear that some were not comfortable with making these stories public.

This reticence is also reflected in the seniors' responses when they were asked about their role in the project directly. A typical response was that the individual was taking part in the project for the students' benefit and not for their own, even though it was clear when they were interacting with the students they were enjoying themselves tremendously. This was not only because the interaction itself was enjoyable, but also because it provided an opportunity to reflect upon their own history and they had a strong sense of creating a legacy in their community.

Synopsis Of 2nd Grade Teacher Response To The Project

The teacher was very positive about the project. The major reason for this was that it fit with her regular classroom objectives. Her students were able to use the internet collaboratively in authentic tasks that improved both their reading and writing skills. The teacher's ability to archive all the messages gave her and the students a long-term resource from which to draw that could be related to any class activity. The project brought new volunteers into the school as a number of the seniors came in on their own initiative to take part in class and school activities. This also generated new allies in the larger community, who are important to the level of support the school receives. There was also a personal benefit to the teacher as very positive publicity was attached to the school and her class in particular. The teacher also felt that the technology was particularly appropriate to the project. When asked whether other options (such as writing letters) would have worked as well, her response was "No, I have done a number of projects with letters. Children do not have that long of an attention span. [By the time that you get a letter back] so much time has passed that you forgot what you said."

Observation Of Face To Face Meeting

The result of the e-mail interaction was that when the seniors and students finally met, they already knew each other and each other's interests. By giving both groups the opportunity to get to know each other, potentially negative stereotypes were dissolved before they actually met. The internet had provided an ideal mechanism to prepare the way for very successful face to face interaction. Nevertheless, there was some awkwardness at the first meeting primarily because the seniors were unfamiliar with the physical environment, but this quickly dissipated, and was hardly evident at the second meeting.

The face to face meetings were a key component of this whole project for a number of reasons. Firstly, they provided an opportunity to get to know the person behind the experiences the students had learned about. Secondly, they enabled the students to get a more concrete understanding of what a "senior" was. Thirdly, they brought the seniors physically into the school. The first and third of these were particularly significant, because on the basis of these personal relationships and being brought into the school, a number of the seniors became volunteers and active supporters of the school.

Discussion

There are a number of key findings in this project. Although all of the issues included in the project assessment plan have not been included here, on-going assessment activities are continuing to be explored. One of the major goals for success was to see if the communication would continue throughout the school year. It succeeded because we negotiated in advance with both stockholders, i.e. the teacher and the seniors. As a result the project fit with the teacher's agenda, and with the seniors' workload. Secondly, the success of the face to face meetings (a crucial component) were successful and more effective because of the prior connections made through e-mail. Thirdly, the project generated goodwill toward the school in a community that traditionally has been generally not supportive, uninterested and unaware of school issues.

Partly for this reason, some of the other issues we intend to explore include how we can maintain seniors' enthusiasm as the project repeats from year to year. We also hope to address more directly the question of the seniors involvement and support of the school. In doing so, we hope to uncover the extent to which the seniors have an enhanced sense of belonging to their own wider community. Other directions to our research include trying

similar projects in a modified form outside of BEV in communities which do not have the same level of computer ownership or internet connectivity.

Finally, this was the first phase of this project, designed in part as a pilot for other projects. The researchers did not know if the project would even last the year , but the project was successful from both the teacher's perspective and the seniors' perspective. Both groups were very interested in continuing the project, and it has continued in a slightly modified form, which the researchers intend to report on at a later date.

"Every time an old person dies, a library closes"

Regardless of whether this particular project had succeeded or not, we would have pursued this line of inquiry. Senior citizens are valuable, but too often ignored resources in our communities. The internet is a tool which can create opportunities to change that concept. Seniors can bring rich, lived experience into the classroom, and students can learn more about particular content, but they also can learn to appreciate their own history and that of their wider community.

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